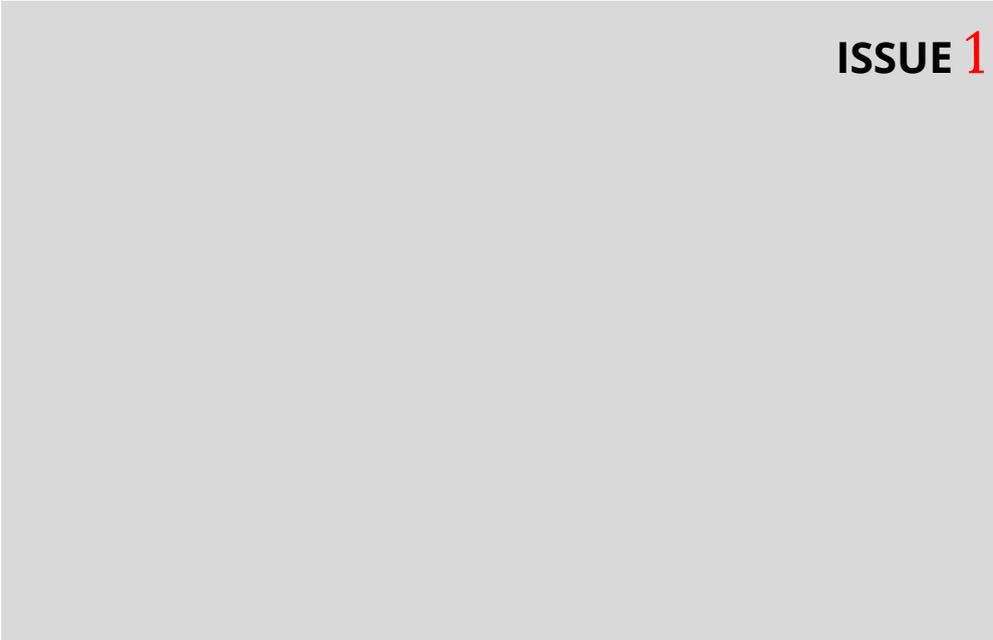
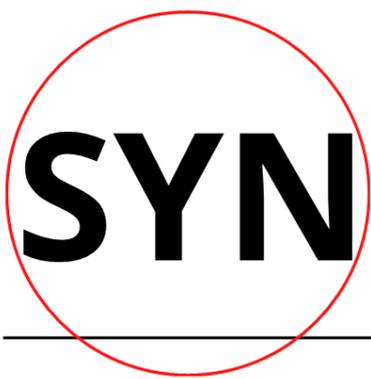




SYNTHESIS
Journal for Philosophy



ISSUE 1

This page intentionally left blank

SYNTHESIS

Journal for Philosophy

1

Non-Existence: Error and Fiction

December 2021

Editors in-chief

Francesco Aronadio
Francesco Fronterotta

Editorial Board

Enrico Berti
Annalisa Coliva
Paolo Crivelli
Erminia Di Iulio
Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero
Franco Ferrari
Gabriele Galluzzo
Laura Anna Macor
Jenny Pelletier
Federico Maria Petrucci
Alice Ragni
Nicholas D. Smith
Ernest Sosa
Achille Varzi
Giovanni Ventimiglia

Editorial Assistant

Marco Picciafuochi

List of contributions

The Paradox of Falsehood and Non-Being: Parmenides, Plato, Russell, and the <i>Tractatus</i> by <i>Simone Nota</i>	7
Before Any Possible Error: A Platonic Argument in Realism by <i>Lorenzo Giovannetti</i>	47
Non-Existence: On the Representability of Nothings by <i>Osman Gazi Birgül</i>	69
Errore, menzogna e finzione tra Nietzsche e Derrida by <i>Maria Cristina Fornari</i>	87
The Antinomy of Omissions by <i>Mario De Caro</i>	97
The Logic of Fictional Existence by <i>Louis Rouillé</i>	111

Louis Rouillé
(Collège de France)

The Logic of Fictional Existence

Abstract: Fictional characters have a complex relationship with existence. Intuitively, they do not exist in our world, but they exist in their fictional world, as shown by the following intuitively true statements:

- (1) In the Lord of the Rings, Frodo exists.
- (2) Frodo does not exist.

This is not yet a problem, for it merely shows that the natural language expression “to exist” must have an indexical shade of meaning, which is well known. But it calls for attention, for it is not clear how readers keep track of the fictional characters (non)existence in practice. In this article, I give a semantic analysis of this pair of statements combining two ideas. First, I motivate (Leonard 1956)’s not so original idea that “to exist” means something like “to have at least one contingent property”. Second, I build on Currie (2003)’s argument to show that fictional characters have contingent properties in their fictional world but only necessary properties outside it. Combining these two ideas nicely explains the fictional characters’ subtle ontological status which crucially depends on the perspective we (readers) take when thinking about them.

Keywords: *fiction, indexicality, existence, modal logic*

1. The fictional character's complex relationship with existence

Some famous fictional characters, like Hamlet, have a complex relationship with existence *in the fiction*. But I think that *all* fictional characters have a complex relationship with existence *outside the fiction*. This is due to the status of fictional discourse in general, which is but one kind of discourse about non-existents.¹ But, contrary to other discourses about nonexistents, it is plain that fictional characters must exist *somewhere*, namely in their fiction of origin. The subject of this paper consists in explaining how fictional characters can be said to exist *in the fiction* while not existing *outside the fiction*. In order to do this, I will first set up the problem based on some linguistic data. Then, I will consider

¹ Alongside with error and lies. Error, lies and fiction form a family called the “false discourses” in Plato’s *Sophist*: they are discourses which “say the things that are not as if they are” (262e-263b).

a definition of singular existence which I find very interesting for the data to be explained. Finally, I will analyse the data by exhibiting some subtle interactions between the necessity operator and the fictional operator.

1.1. *Fictional characters as existents*

Here is a statement that I take to be intuitively true:

- (1) In *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo exists.

Indeed, it would be preposterous to claim that Frodo does not exist *in the fiction*. The intuitive ground for the truth of (1) is that Frodo does many things in the story. In particular, he carries the Ring to Mount Doom so as to destroy it. But one can only walk and carry things if one exists. In other words, existence is a precondition for doing the things Frodo does in the fiction. Hence, even if Tolkien did not write explicitly so, it is clear that Frodo must be existing in the fiction.

This line of reasoning works well for Frodo and *the Lord of the Rings*, but it can be objected that it does not generalize to all fictional characters. One famous example is Italo Calvino's *the Nonexistent Knight*. It tells the story of a Knight in Charlemagne's army which is but an empty armour. He is characterised as being an over-zealous spoilsport and other soldiers in the army despise him for that. A disguised woman soldier in the same army is in love with him and wishes he was existent, for he would have a body and they could make love. You can see how this fictional character has a strange ontological status *in the fiction*, and this is surely part of the novel's originality: In *the Nonexistent Knight*, the Knight does not exist. This is thus a counter-example to a generalisation based on (1). Of course, Calvino's Knight is not alone: there are many so called "metafictions" in which fictional characters are fictional *in the story*.

Interesting though such counter-examples are, I think we can put them aside as exceptional cases. Fictional characters are *usually* not like that, and their ontological status within their fiction of origin is *usually* not bizarre. Besides, there are good reasons to think that metafiction presupposes as a general rule that fictional characters usually exist in the fiction. Indeed, Calvino's novel

intentionally violates this rule, so as to produce the amusing metaphysical alienation he is after. So Calvino's novel presupposes that something like (1) is usually true. One should thus theorize about metafictional characters where ontologically bizarre characters dwell separately, and this falls out of the scope of this paper.²

1.2. Fictional characters as nonexistents

Here is another intuitively true statement:

(2) Frodo does not exist.

Suppose for instance that my little cousin read *the Lord of the Rings* in such a way that she thinks Tolkien's saga talks about genuine historical facts. She would thus believe that Frodo really existed. In that situation, I should tell her that she misread *the Lord of the Rings*, that it is in fact a fiction and, consequently, that Frodo is a purely fictional character. Of course, fictions can contain historical figures, but Frodo is definitely not one of those historical figures. The fact that Frodo is “a purely fictional character” entails the truth of (2). Indeed, part of what it means to “be purely fictional” consists in lacking existence.

Though (2) is intuitively true, many theorists about fictional characters are ready to deny that (2) is, strictly speaking, true. In other words, many philosophers have good reasons to think that Frodo does exist *in some sense*. The reason is that we can talk about him, think or feel about him. Yet, talking, thinking and feeling are clearly relational properties. Hence, we are related to fictional characters in some sense. These often dubbed “intentional relations”, they continue, presuppose a mode of existence. As a result, fictional characters should not be thought of as *lacking* existence by virtue of being fictional, but rather as enjoying a different mode of existence from ours. This line of reasoning develops into a family of theories about fictional characters (and other intentional entities) that is generally called “neo-meinongianism” as a tribute to the

² For more on ontologically bizarre characters and a discussion of the so-called “reality principle” which grounds the usual non-problematic ontological status of fictional characters in their fiction of origin, see Everett (2005).

Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong (the first contemporary philosopher to have explicitly defended such a position). There are many versions of neo-meinongianism.³

I will not discuss neo-meinongianism in this paper and I will take as a working hypothesis that there is some truth in the idea that fictional characters do not exist. As a matter of fact, as the reader will see below, I think the problem I discuss here is orthogonal to whether (2) is *really* (as opposed to merely intuitively) true or not. Indeed, the problem I consider consists in examining the *contrast* between (1) and (2). So neo-meinongians should rephrase my linguistic data so as to make a difference in the *mode of existence* fictional characters enjoy inside and outside the fiction. This contrast is thus an empirical, linguistic datum that needs to be explained regardless of one's preferred analysis of statements like (2).

1.3. Setting up the problem

The linguistic data is thus the following:

- (1) In *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo exists.
- (2) Frodo does not exist.

Both statements are intuitively true. I talked of a *contrast*, but it might well be remarked that there is no apparent tension between the two statements. For once, intuition is not contradictory, and maybe we should leave it there. So I should explain what I have in mind when I say “theorize about this contrast”. This linguistic data points to a more general (and familiar) point about the meaning of the natural language expression “to exist”. The idea, broadly speaking, is that the expression “to exist” is an indexical expression. By which I mean that in order to understand statements containing “to exist”, one needs to have some information about the context of utterance. Entities can exist *there*, without existing *here*: it all depends wherefrom we utter the sentence. As for fictional char-

³ To name a few: Parsons (1980) and Zalta (1983) think that fictional characters enjoy a mode of existence akin to other abstract objects like numbers; Van Inwagen (1977) and Thomasson (1999) think they are “abstract artefacts” like symphonies; Lewis (2015) thinks they are unactualized *possibilia*.

acters, the data suggests, they do exist *in their fiction of origin*, but they do not exist *outside it*.⁴ The crucial difference between (1) and (2) is obviously the presence of what might be called a “fictional operator” in (1).⁵ In other words, it is the presence and absence of a fictional operator that explains why there is no contradiction (or even tension) between the two statements. This observation is true regardless of one's preferred analysis of the fictional operator. It may even be seen as a general constraint on a good analysis of the fictional operator: a fictional operator is a linguistic expression which, among other things, shifts the relevant indexical parameter attached to the natural language predicate “to exist”.

The indexicality of “to exist” is indeed *familiar*, for it has been forcefully argued in the famous (Lewis 1986). Lewis claimed that “to exist” is part of a family of expressions like “to be actual” or “to be real” which are fundamentally indexical expressions whose semantic role is to indicate one's position in the modal space. Consequently, a statement like (2) should be analysed so as to mean something like “Frodo is not part of *our* world”, uttered by a speaker like you and me. This paraphrase comes out true, for Frodo is not to be found in any part of the world we live in. The linguistic parameter attached to “to exist” (and other similar expressions), which can typically be shifted using a fictional operator, is, according to (Lewis 1978), a *world* parameter. Consequently, a statement like (1) should be analysed so as to mean something like “Frodo is part of the worlds targeted by *the Lord of the Rings*”. This paraphrase comes out true, whatever one's preferred way of selecting those worlds, for Frodo is indeed a part of Middle Earth, if we can get there.

I think this general, familiar point is fundamentally correct. However, in the rest of this paper, I want to remain neutral on whether the relevant parameter typically shifted by a fictional operator is a *world* parameter. Indeed, there

⁴ The linguistic data I examine suggests that “outside the character's fiction of origin” means “in reality”. However, I could produce other statements showing that one can be outside a character's fiction origin without being in reality. For instance, consider the intuitive truth of “In Jane Austen's *Emma*, Frodo does not exist”. Of course, one would need to specify *in which non-original fictions* Frodo exists and in which he does not. I set aside these complications here to focus on the contrast I am trying to build.

⁵ The expression is canonical, and is defined, for instance, in Lewis (1978).

are good reasons to doubt that fictions typically select possible worlds.⁶ I will thus only retain the idea that *there* is a linguistic parameter attached to “to exist and that this linguistic parameter is typically shifted by fictional operators. This existential claim is supported by the linguistic data. For simplicity, let us call it a “fictional parameter”.⁷

The problem can now be expressed as follows: How does the shifting back and forth of the fictional parameter work? It is an empirical problem, so to speak. We, readers of fiction and dwellers of reality, have very firm intuitions about *where* fictional characters stand. We know that they are not *here* to be found and that they are *there*. In other words, we (readers) keep track of the fictional character's (non)existence intuitively.⁸ Answering this question consist in giving a theory of fictional existence: how can we infer the fictional existence of fictional characters while preventing the inference to the real existence of fictional characters?

2. Existence and contingency

Singular existence is a notion which should be contrasted with *general existence*: the distinction was first clearly made in (Quine 1939). When we say that “winged horses do not exist”, we deny *general existence* to winged horses; in other words, we say that the natural language predicate “winged horse” is empty, i.e. instantiated by no real individual. When we say that “Pegasus does not exist”, we deny *singular existence* to Pegasus; in other words, we say that the natural language singular term “Pegasus” is empty, i.e. denotes no real individual. Let us focus on singular existence only.

In (Leonard 1956), the author is interested in what he calls “the modern logic presupposition”. This presupposition is that, in classical predicate logic, a

⁶ These doubts have been raised again and again in the philosophy of fiction literature. It consists in showing that fictional worlds are always incomplete and sometimes inconsistent, whereas possible worlds are, by definition, complete and consistent. See Currie (1990: 54) and Walton (1990: 64) for a classic exposition of this view. See also Woodward (2011) for a review of the literature on this point.

⁷ The reader may keep Lewis's world parameter in mind for the rest of the paper, for I do not think it crucially affects my argument.

⁸ Maybe there are cases, like in some metafiction, where intuition flickers. But I think it is a remarkable, empirical fact that we *almost always* know where we stand relative to the fictional characters we read about.

singular term always refers. This presupposition is the one I used when eliciting the intuitive truth of (1): one can only do the things one does if one exists. According to this presupposition, one can infer the existence of something under the assumption that one can truly predicate of that something. Such inferences, Leonard remarks, are the building blocks of famous “existential arguments”, like Anselm's argument for the existence of God or Descartes' *cogito*. Commenting on the *cogito* in (Leonard 1956: 57), Leonard suggests an interesting way to revise this presupposition:

Notice that Descartes starts with “I think”. There are other predicates than thinking with which he *might* have started. (Whether *he* would have regarded them as producing equally evident premises, I do not know or care. I should have been willing to grant them to him.) For example, he might have said,

“I am I.”

Or again said, “Either I think or I don't think”. In other words, he might have taken *any* law of thought and affirmed it relative to himself, and I should have been willing to accept the affirmation as true.

But I should *not* have granted that Descartes existed. In other words, existence is not implied by necessary, or analytic, predicates. It is, rather, a consequence only of *contingent* truths. That I think is a contingent truth, rather than a necessary one, and I say that despite of Descartes' *later* claim that thought is of my essence.

I should strongly emphasise that Leonard's claim is not a historical claim about Descartes' argument. Indeed, in the controversies subsequent to the publication of *Meditations on first philosophy*, Pierre Gassendi opposed a similar argument to the *cogito*, saying that Descartes could as well say “I walk, therefore I am” but this would have prevented him from later inferring that he was a thinking substance. In his response to Gassendi, Descartes made explicit why it is important to his argument that the existence of the soul be tied up to *thinking*, as opposed to walking. This shows that Leonard's comment is beside the point when it comes to explaining the Cartesian doctrine. The appeal to Descartes is merely a forceful illustration of his point about singular existence.

The point is the following: one should *not* infer singular existence from predication *only*; one must also make sure that the predication is contingently

true. Given standard notations of second-order, modal logic, and $E!$ standing for singular existence, we thus get Leonard's definition of singular existence:⁹

$$(3) \quad E!t =_{def} \exists\varphi(\varphi t \wedge \blacklozenge\neg\varphi t)$$

We can thus define nonexistence in the following way:

$$(4) \quad \neg E!t =_{def} \neg\exists\varphi(\varphi t \wedge \blacklozenge\neg\varphi t) \equiv \forall\varphi(\neg\varphi t \vee \neg\blacklozenge\neg\varphi t) \equiv \\ \equiv \forall\varphi(\varphi t \rightarrow \blacksquare\varphi t)$$

Which says: t does not exist iff all the predicates which are true of t are necessarily true of t .

First, a little comment on the link between existence and modality. In his paper, which was published in 1956, Leonard takes a lot of time motivating the idea that modal logic is *indeed* relevant for a logically motivated discussion of existence. Back then, there was no formal semantics for modal logic, and appealing to modal logic was tantamount to giving up on the formalizing of an idea. Things have changed. And as we remarked with Lewis above, I think it is now generally acknowledged that singular existence *must be* articulated with modality in some sense. However, I do not think that Leonard's idea that we can infer from contingency to existence (and from necessity only to nonexistence) is represented in the contemporary literature.

Second, I want to remark that all existing individuals, according to this definition, enjoy contingent existence. In other words, an existing individual can always truly say: "I might not have existed". I think this squares well with intuition: few will go as far as to say that their singular existence is a necessary feature of the universe they live in.

⁹ One could be surprised by this sudden call for second-order logic here. But this is not that surprising if we consider that the other standard logical predicate, namely identity ($=$), is also defined using second-order logic. Identity is usually taken to be defined by Leibniz's law which is the following second-order logic formula:

$$\forall x \forall y \forall\varphi ((\varphi x \leftrightarrow \varphi y) \leftrightarrow x = y)$$

For an inquiry into the connection between identity and singular existence, see the seminal Hintikka (1959).

Third, it seems that Leonard's definition of singular nonexistence captures nicely the idea of "being merely supposed" or "being an artifice of a theory". Indeed, one can stipulate that some individual exists. But the stipulated individual *actually* exists only if the underlying theory is *actually* true. Otherwise, the stipulated individual remains what is standardly called an "artifice of the theory" (or an erroneous supposition). In such cases, the individual's properties are all and only the stipulated properties as well as the logical consequences one can draw from the theory it comes from. The individual holds its properties by definition, hence necessarily.¹⁰ Consequently, by Leonard's definition, artifices of wrong theories do not exist.

But take Vulcan, the famous artifice of Newton's gravitation theory introduced by Urbain Le Verrier. It might be objected that some intentional properties are contingently true of Vulcan. For instance, it is contingently true that:

- (5) Le Verrier thought the discovery of Vulcan would make him famous.

I think that these statements are not as bad for Leonard's definition as one might first think. Indeed, (5) merely implies that Le Verrier *thinks* that Vulcan exists, which is true. Vulcan has indeed a contingent property *in Le Verrier's thinking* (that of making Le Verrier famous in the near future), over and above the necessary properties predicted by the theory. So from (5), we can infer:

- (6) Le Verrier thought that Vulcan has a contingent property (that of being discovered by Le Verrier).

but not:

- (7) Vulcan has a contingent property (that of having been discovered by Le Verrier).

¹⁰ I suppose Williamson (1990) made a similar observation when defining what "object-hood" means. He remarks that «objecthood is not obviously subject to contingency at all». He calls this the «principle that all objecthood is necessary objecthood».

SYNTHESIS

since Le Verrier did not in fact discover Vulcan, though he wrongly thought he did. So there are two distinct perspectives to be distinguished: that of Le Verrier believing that Newton's theory is right; and that of the enlightened astronomer (you and me) knowing that Newton's theory is inaccurate on this one prediction. Within each perspective, Leonard's definition applies and makes good predictions (Vulcan exists in Le Verrier's head but not in reality). This suggests that the theorizing of perspectives is compatible with Leonard's definition, despite *prima facie* counterexamples like (5). This, as the reader will see below, applies to fictional characters too.

3. *Fictional characters and contingency*

I cannot hope to have established Leonard's definition of singular existence in general. My remarks only aim at showing that the definition is workable. I will now turn to the part of my argument that needs to be defended as true. To make it clear, the argument of this paper should be understood as follows: under the assumption that there is some truth in Leonard's definition of existence, we can explain why (1) and (2) are true statements, given the truth of what I defend in the next section.

The agenda is now clear. The fact that (1) is true is explained by the fact that fictional characters have contingent properties in their fiction of origin. Simultaneously, explaining that (2) is true amounts to showing that fictional characters have only necessary properties outside it. The keeping track of fictional characters' (non)existence is then explained by our ability to keep track of modalities, when we focus on fictional characters.

3.1. *Interaction between the fictional operator and the necessity operator*

While reflecting on the fact that Anna Karenina might have resisted her inclination for Vronsky, in Tolstoi's novel, it is argued in Currie (2003: 137):

I think it makes good sense to say that Anna might not have fallen for Vronsky. Indeed, we all think that it is true that she might not have. The contingency of this event in this and other stories is important; the story would affect us in a quite different way if it were thought to be working out of a necessity.

Let us indeed consider Frodo in *the Lord of the Rings*. It is clear in several points of the story that Frodo might have abandoned his quest to destroy the Ring; for instance, he might have surrendered to Sauron. I say that this possibility is clear in *the Lord of the Rings* because it is undoubtedly true in the story that Frodo has wilfully resisted the huge temptation not to destroy the Ring several times. Relevantly, near the end of the saga, when Frodo is supposed to throw the Ring into Mount Doom, he chooses not to do so, because he has given way to his greed. Hopefully for the plot, Gollum intervenes, bites the Ring off Frodo's hand and then Frodo throws Gollum (with the Ring) into the lava. This crucial passage shows that the possibility that Frodo abandoned the quest is indeed essential to the reading of the story. To imitate Currie's argument on this point, Frodo's *resistance* makes sense only if there is a possibility to do otherwise. In other words, if Frodo was *by necessity* to resist the temptation all along, then the staging of his resistance would not be interesting for the reader. Consequently, in order to make sense of the story, it must be true that:

- (8) In *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo did not abandon his quest to destroy the Ring, though he might have.

What this observation shows is that fiction reading implies not only imagining the unfolding of some fictional events, but also imagining what might have happened in the fiction, had such and such character acted differently.

Let us now change the perspective and consider Frodo from where we are, outside the fiction. The intuition is now the following: Frodo would not be Frodo if he had abandoned his quest to destroy the Ring and surrender to Sauron. Indeed, had Frodo surrendered to Sauron, *the Lord of the Rings*, i.e. the actual fiction that was written by Tolkien and published in the real world, would not be the same story. At the end of this alternative story, we (readers) would plausibly have had to imagine that Sauron won the war and ruled over Middle Earth.

I think it is useful to back up this intuition with the following observation concerning the mixed feelings we (readers) have when we consider, for instance, the character Isildur. Isildur, it is told to Frodo at some point in the story, was the one who cut the Ring from Sauron's hand. At this point, Isildur had the op-

SYNTHESIS

portunity to destroy the Ring, but he chose to keep it as a war chest. The reader is expected to think that Isildur *should* have destroyed the Ring back then; after all, it would have solved everything, as far as Middle Earth is concerned. But of course, had Isildur destroyed the Ring back then, Frodo's quest would not have happened. Since we (readers) are enjoying¹¹ *the Lord of the Rings*, we can sense that our real pleasure depends on the necessity that the fictional events are what they are.¹² The idea is that, given the fact that *the Lord of the Rings* is what it is, the fictional events could not have been otherwise. Consequently, from the real world perspective, Frodo, by necessity, does not abandon his quest and surrender to Sauron though he fictionally might have. This grounds the truth of:

- (9) Necessarily, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo did not abandon his quest to destroy the Ring and surrender to Sauron.

The contrast is now clear: it lies in the interaction between the fictional operator and the necessity operator of natural language. If we simplify the statements, we have:

- (10) In *the Lord of the Rings*, necessarily, Frodo does not abandon his quest.
(11) Necessarily, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo does not abandon his quest.

(10) is *false*, for the story is such that Frodo might have abandoned his quest (and this is crucial to the understanding of and emotional engagement with Tolkien's story). (11) is *true*, for if Frodo had abandoned his quest, then the

¹¹ Enjoying is presupposed, since the reader reads. But you can invert the mixed feelings if you (as a reader) disliked Tolkien's saga.

¹² This empirical fact about the mixed feelings of the readers has certainly something to do with the so-called "paradox of tragedy" whose first formulation arguably comes from Aristotle's *Poetics*, but is now defined so as to be distinguished from other "paradoxes" about fiction, see for instance Currie (2010) for a recent formulation. The connection might be interesting because the *metaphysical necessity* of fictional events when seen from the outside may have something to do with Aristotle aesthetic claim that some kind of *moral necessity* must be there when we enjoy good tragedies. I do not know enough about Aristotle's doctrine to go further than this.

story would not be *the Lord of the Rings*.¹³ This contrast, taken with Leonard's definition of existence, explains both the truth of (1) and (2).

Before I proceed with the objections, let me add a note on the application of Leonard's definition to fictional characters. It follows from this application that fictional characters can be nonexistent in their fiction of origin if they happen to have only necessary properties in the fiction. In that case, such a necessary character would be nonexistent both in reality and in its fiction of origin. This is not a problem for the view. It merely suggests that the intuitive truth of (1) does not generalise, as the case of "metafictional characters" already shows. But one should thus leave some space for other kinds of ontologically bizarre characters who would be nonexistent for logical reasons (and not by author's say-so). Of course, it is possible to combine both ways of creating unusual fictional characters into a logically inspired metafiction.¹⁴

3.2. On the contingency of books

If I follow my intuition, I would say that the falsity of (10) is far easier to accept than the truth of (11). In fact, I think that there are no objection to the intuitive ground I gave for the falsity of (10), whereas there are many objections one can think of when presented with the intuitive truth of (11).¹⁵ I will try to raise and respond to these objections in the rest of this paper.

First, it might be objected that Tolkien's story is not *by necessity* what it actually is. Indeed, it is possible that Tolkien had written *the Lord of the Rings* in such a way that Frodo surrendered to Sauron at some crucial point. If there is such possible world, then (11) would be false. Instead, we would have:

- (12) Had *the Lord of the Rings* been different, Frodo would have abandoned his quest.

¹³ Alternatively, if we want to focus on Frodo, we could say with Currie: «Necessarily, someone who would abandon the quest would not be Frodo» (2003).

¹⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

¹⁵ Note that, if my argument is correct, those who would argue that (11) is not true have something in common with those who think that (2) is not true.

SYNTHESIS

And the truth of this counterfactual seems to contradict the truth of (11).

The response is that, in (11), the fictional operator is not in the necessity operator's scope. In other words, what is necessary in (11) is not that *the Lord of the Ring* is the story it actually is, but that *given the story we know*, it is not possible that "Frodo does not abandon his quest" be false. (11) should be distinguished from:

- (13) Necessarily, *the Lord of the Rings* is such that Frodo does not abandon his quest.

This statement is indeed contradicted by the possibility of Tolkien writing *the Lord of the Rings* differently. But it should be quite clear that it does not express the same proposition as (11). So the objection misses the point.

It should thus be emphasised that Frodo's not abandoning his quest is a necessary feature of Tolkien's story *as we know it*, and that is what (11) says. This is tantamount to saying that a story in which Frodo abandons his quest would not be the story we imagine when we read *the Lord of the Rings*. This, I think, is uncontroversial. The generalisation is that the necessary features of fictional characters are *conditional* on the identity of the fictional works they originate from. But of course, the identity conditions for fictional works are by no means necessary. For all we know, any work of fiction could have been different, or even not have been written at all. It is even possible that no fictional work was ever written, since it is clearly possible that humans never existed. Consequently, the fictional characters' nonexistence in the real world (expressed in statements like (2)) is conditional upon there being real fictional works.

As an aside remark, I should say that some neo-meinongians want to grant fictional characters a special mode of existence precisely because of this acknowledged dependence on *real* fictional works. These usually refer to arguments made attractive by Thomasson 1999, in which she theorises about this mode of conditional existence. One way of framing the debate between friends of abstract artefacts and those of us anti-realists who want to deny the existence to fictional characters *tout court* would be to ask whether (and how) one wants to distinguish statements like (2) which express the nonexistence of *fictional* characters and statements like the following:

- (14) Shrodo does not exist.

which express the nonexistence of a character which neither exists in the real world, nor in any already written fiction. The debate is whether the natural language expression “to exist” is sensible to the distinction we conceptually make between Frodo and Shrodo. As explained above, I think this is an orthogonal issue which does not affect the contrast I am working on.

3.3. *Fictional characters outside of books*

The second objection consists in remarking that Frodo seems to have many contingent properties, when we consider intentional relations. For instance, suppose Frodo is my little cousin's favourite fictional character. Then, the following is contingently true in our world:

- (15) Frodo is my little cousin's favourite fictional character.

So Frodo has at least one contingent property, namely that of being my little cousin's favourite fictional character. By Leonard's definition of existence, it follows that (2) is not true.

The objection is indeed to the point. I think it is difficult to adequately respond to it, for any response presupposes a theory of intentional predicates which well exceeds the scope of this article. For what it is worth, I will thus give a response which I think goes in the right direction, but it is possible that it is wrong-headed for theoretical reasons about intentionality I do not know about.

First, one might say that we can indeed infer from (15) that Frodo exists outside its fiction of origin, but not that he exists in reality. Indeed, what (15) says is that Frodo has an important place in my little cousin's interior life. But my little cousin's interior life is very different from reality, as anyone's interior life for that matter. Reality is usually defined as the set of all those things which do not depend on anyone's interior life. So my little cousin's life may very well be a place where one can often find Frodo, but that does not make him any more real.

SYNTHESIS

This first remark suggests an important distinction which, I think, is a response to the objection. Frodo *qua* fictional character of *the Lord of the Rings* should be distinguished from Frodo the dweller of my little cousin's interior life. In a sense, it is the same distinction one should make between Frodo, the fictional character of *the Lord of the Rings*, and all the Frodos which are the characters of the numerous fan fictions stemming from Tolkien's saga. A fan-Frodo is, by definition, a duplication of the original Frodo into another fiction (which can resemble the original fiction or not). In a trivial sense, Frodo does indeed exist outside its fiction of origin, since it actually exists in many fan-fictions. And the existence of fan-fictions including Frodo is clearly a contingent fact. But I think we should exclude these facts "about Frodo" when we interpret a statement like (11). Indeed, by construction, everything that is true in a fan-fiction is not true of *the original* Frodo, but of a duplicate of Frodo.¹⁶

The next step of the response consists in defending that what my little cousin has in mind when she thinks about her favourite fictional character is also a duplicate of Frodo. I think the analogy between intentional attitudes toward fictional characters and fan-fictions should strike the reader as relevant here. Of course, it crucially depends on what one means when one says something like (15). The way I understand it is that my little cousin thinks about Frodo outside of *the Lord of the Rings* and compares it with other fictional characters she knows about, so as to acknowledge that Frodo is definitely the one she enjoys imagining the most. In order to do so, she would inevitably develop imaginative scenarii which are similar to fan-fictions in that it duplicates the original Frodo.

Now, duplicates of the original Frodo may very well have contingent properties. But these are irrelevant to the original Frodo. Just like it would be irrelevant for someone who wants to know all the properties Frodo has in the fiction to come and study my little cousin because she often disguises herself so as to look like Frodo. All the properties the original Frodo has are the properties

¹⁶ It is conceivable that some fan-fictions are such that what is true in the fan-fiction changes what is true in the fiction of origin. What I have in mind is what is what is called the "retroactive continuity" (retcon) method of writing fan-fictions. It consists in writing a fiction which explains the events in the fiction of origin in such a way that it crucially affects what is taken to be true in the fiction of origin. I set aside these interesting complications for it seems to me that they resemble metafiction, in the sense that they should be theorised about separately.

one can read about in *the Lord of the Rings*. If we look at all and only those properties from the outside, they are necessary, for Frodo would not be Frodo had he not these very properties.

3.4. How determinate are fictional characters?

The next objection is the following: Frodo's necessary features (outside the fiction) are not so many. In fact, Frodo has (outside the fiction) many of the contingent features he has in the fiction. In other words, the example given above is fair enough, but it does not generalise, because it is a special case.

(11) is true, because *the Lord of the Rings* would not be *the Lord of the Rings*, had Frodo abandoned his quest. But suppose that, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo was an inch taller than he fictionally is. Would that make *the Lord of the Rings* a different story? Surely not. Even keeping *the Lord of the Rings* what it actually is, it seems that the following is false:

- (16) Necessarily, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo could not have been an inch taller.

Consequently, even under the condition that *the Lord of the Rings* is *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo's height is not necessary. This, of course, suggests that many of Frodo's features which are contingent in the fiction carry over outside the fiction. Any feature of the fictional Frodo which can be altered without breaking the identity conditions for *the Lord of the Rings* can breed such counter-examples.¹⁷ There are, in principle, arbitrarily many, as the example shows.

This objection is obviously very strong. It would be preposterous to argue that *the Lord of the Rings* cannot be altered a single comma without becoming a new fiction. Indeed, one would be forced to conclude that, for instance, the first edition of *the Lord of the Rings* and the second edition of *the Lord of the Rings* are two different works of fiction in the same sense as *the Lord of the Rings* and Jane Austen's *Emma* are two different works of fiction, which is absurd. So

¹⁷ I do not need to give precise identity conditions for works of fiction, for I merely need that some counter-examples can be constructed.

the natural response consists in making a sharp distinction between Tolkien's fictional text and Tolkien's plot. In order to make this distinction, I will merely rely on intuition here, for a complete theory of this distinction well exceeds the scope of this article. Besides, it is a distinction that virtually every philosopher of fiction admits for some reason or other.

The plot can be understood as a subset of what is true in the fiction. Of course, what is true in the fiction depends on what is explicitly in the fictional text, but it cannot reduce to it.¹⁸ Indeed, many things are true in the fiction, but are derived from explicit fictional truths, e.g. the fictional truth that Frodo exists, for Tolkien never explicitly wrote that Frodo was existent. On the other hand, what is explicitly written in the fictional text may turn out to be false in the fiction, when we discover that the narrator was unreliable.¹⁹ The set of fictional truths, *a fortiori* the plot, should thus be distinguished from the fictional text.

The plot is the subset of fictional truths which corresponds to the narratological structure of the fiction. It thus contains the crucial fictional events and the way they unfold. If we focus on the fictional character, I think it is useful to use Currie's terminology, when he distinguishes between the "identity of the protagonist" and the character's "role". What the plot determines is the character's role, not its identity. Talking about Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina*, Currie adds (2003: 140):

Think of the Anna-role as a function from worlds to individuals such that it picks out an individual in world w just in case she is the unique individual in w who did all the things Anna is said to do in the story. One of the things she is said to do is fall for Vronsky, and that is why no one in any world who resists Vronsky's charms in that world (or never meets him) would be Anna.

In this picture, the role is a function (determined by the plot) and the protagonist is the result of that function. The plot is thus that which determines

¹⁸ Except for D'Alessandro (2016), I think nobody ever argued for such a reduction.

¹⁹ Unreliable narrators are narrators whose point of view distort the fictional events they report. The first extensive examination of unreliable narration can be found in Booth 1961. In some fictions, it is crucial to understand that (and how much) the narrator is unreliable. For instance, Nabokov's *Lolita* is a case in point: the reader is expected to understand that Humbert Humbert is unreliable. In such cases, although the narrator explicitly says that Dolores willingly fled with him and pursued her sexual desire for him, the reader implicitly understands that she was abducted and a victim of paedophilia.

the different roles, and the different protagonists are the imagined individuals in the head of the readers. Different readers might imagine, say, Frodo differently. But the plot of *the Lord of the Rings* determines the Frodo-role, and given this plot, it is part of the Frodo-role not to abandon the quest. In other words, an imagined Frodo who would surrender to Sauron would not have been a character which corresponds to the Frodo-role, i.e. a result of the function. In this sense, the Frodo-role is indeed necessarily determined by the plot of *the Lord of the Rings*. Hence, we explain the truth of (1) and generalize to every aspect of the Frodo-role.²⁰

4. Recap

Let me recap the data and my argument. The data consists in explaining why both of these statements are intuitively true:

- (1) In *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo exists.
- (2) Frodo does not exist.

The argument is the following: first, I take Leonard's definition of existence according to which the expression "to exist" means "to have at least one contingent property". Then, I show that, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo has many contingent properties, for instance: he might have abandoned his quest to destroy the Ring. Consequently, (1) is true, according to Leonard's definition of singular existence. Simultaneously, I show that if we look at Frodo from the outside of its fiction of origin, we see him as rigidly attached to the plot of *the Lord of the Rings*: given what *the Lord of the Rings* actually is, Frodo could not have been different. Consequently, (2) is true, according to Leonard's definition of singular existence.

²⁰ Note that Currie's distinction is in keeping with an open area of research which traces back to Kripke (1973). It consists in explaining how these two senses of the fictional name relate to each other. The reader can consult the important Salmon (1998) on this, and Récanati (2021) for a recent contribution.

SYNTHESIS

I thus defend the view that the linguistic data is explained by a subtle interaction between a necessity operator and the fictional operator, shown by the following contrast:

- (10) In *the Lord of the Rings*, necessarily, Frodo does not abandon his quest. (FALSE)
- (11) Necessarily, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo does not abandon his quest. (TRUE)

There is a sharp asymmetry between (10) and (11), which mirrors Leonard's definition. Accepting (10) as intuitively false, which is easy, suffices to explain why (11) is intuitively true. However, in order to explain why (10) is intuitively true, one must generalise the intuitive truth of (11) to all the properties we can attach to Frodo. This generalisation meets several objections which I tried to answer separately. In answering the objections, my primary aim was to convince the reader that the overall argument is, deep down, valid. If the reader is not convinced, I hope they have enjoyed the attempt all the same.

I once again highlight that my argument is conditional upon Leonard's definition of singular existence, and provided one has reasons to reject it, one might be inclined to dislike my argument. On the other hand, the interest one might have for my argument could be a reason to like Leonard's definition of singular existence. As for the philosophy of fiction proper, I think the argument should be seen as an attempt to explain what is so peculiar with fictional existence and emphasise the complex relationship fictional characters entertain with singular existence. The complexity of the relationship, I suggest, is due to subtle interactions between alethic modality and fiction, when we think about them.

References

- Booth, W. C., (1961), *The rhetoric of fiction*, University of Chicago Press.
- Currie, G., (1990), *The nature of fiction*, Cambridge University Press. (doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511897498)
- Currie, G., (2003), 'Characters and contingency', *Dialectica* 57, 2, 137–148. (doi: 10.1111/j.1746-8361.2003.tb00261.x)
- Currie, G., (2010), 'Tragedy', *Analysis*, 70, 4, 632–638. (doi: 10.1093/analys/anq076)
- Donnellan, K. S., (1975), 'Speaking of nothing', *Contemporary Research in Philosophical Logic and Linguistic Semantics*, Springer, 93–118. (doi: 10.1007/978-94-010-1756-5_5)
- D'Alessandro, W., (2016), 'Explicitism about truth in fiction', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 56, 1, 53–65.
- Everett, A., (2005), 'Against fictional realism', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 102, 12, 624–649. (doi: 10.5840/jphil2005102129)
- Hintikka, J., (1959), 'Existential presuppositions and existential commitments', *The journal of philosophy*, 56, 3, 125–137. (doi: 10.2307/2021988)
- Kripke, S., (1972), *Naming and Necessity*, 1st ed, Harvard University Press
- Kripke, S., (1973/2013), *Reference and Existence: The John Locke Lectures*, Oxford University Press, USA. (doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199928385.001.0001)
- Leonard, H., (1956), 'The logic of existence', *Philosophical studies* 7, 4, 49–64. (doi: 10.1007/BF02221764)
- Lewis, D., (1975), 'Reply to Dana Scott "Is There Life on Possible Worlds?"', Loewer, B. & Schaffer, J. (eds.), *A Companion to David Lewis*, Wiley Blackwell, 18–21. (doi: 10.1002/9781118398593.ch3)
- Lewis, D., (1978), 'Truth in fiction', *American philosophical quarterly*, 15, 1, 37–46. url: https://www.andrewmbailey.com/dkl/Truth_in_Fiction.pdf
- Lewis, D., (1986), *On the plurality of worlds*, Vol. 322, Oxford Blackwell.

SYNTHESIS

Parsons, T., (1980), *Nonexistent objects*, New Haven, Yale University Press. (doi: 10.2307/2274197)

Quine, W. V. O., (1939), 'Designation and existence', *The Journal of Philosophy* 36, 26, 701–709. (doi: 10.2307/2017667)

Récanati, F., (2021), 'Fictional reference as simulation', in Maier, E. & Stokke, A. (eds.), *The Language of Fiction*, Oxford University Press.

Salmon, N., (1998), 'Nonexistence', *Noûs* 32, 3, 277–319. (doi: 10.1111/0029-4624.00101)

Thomasson, A., (1999), *Fiction and Metaphysics*, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy, Cambridge University Press. (doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511527463)

Van Inwagen, P., (1977), 'Creatures of fiction', *American philosophical quarterly* 14, 4, 299–308. url: https://andrewmbailey.com/pvi/Creatures_of_Fiction.pdf

Walton, K., (1990), *Mimesis as Make-believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Harvard University Press.

Williamson, T., (1990), 'Necessary identity and necessary existence', in Haller, R. & Brandl, J. (eds.), *Wittgenstein—Eine Neubewertung/Wittgenstein—Towards a Re-Evaluation*, Springer, 168–175. (doi: 10.1007/978-3-662-30086-2_15)

Woodward, R., (2011), 'Truth in fiction', *Philosophy Compass*, 6, 3, 158–167. (doi: 10.1111/j.1747-9991.2010.00367.x)

Zalta, E., (1983), *Abstract Objects: An Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics*, 1st ed., Synthese Library 160, Springer Netherlands. (doi: 10.1007/978-94-009-6980-3)